United Nations A/60/324

General Assembly

Distr.: General
31 August 2005

Original: English

Sixtieth session
Item 73 (c) of the provisional agenda*
Human rights questions: situations and reports of special rapporteurs and representatives

The issue of Palestinian pregnant women giving birth at Israeli checkpoints

Report of the High Commissioner for Human Rights**

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Commission on Human Rights resolution 2005/7 of 14 April 2005, entitled "Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and Other Arabs of the Occupied Territory, including East Jerusalem", paragraph 4 of which reads as follows:

> "*The Commission on Human Rights*,
>
> "
>
> "4. *Requests* the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to address the issue of Palestinian pregnant women giving birth at Israeli checkpoints owing to denial of access by Israel to hospitals, with a view to ending this inhumane Israeli practice, and to report thereon to the General Assembly at its sixtieth session and the Commission at its sixty-second session;"

2. On 21 July 2005, the Secretary-General addressed notes verbales to the Permanent Mission of Israel and to the Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine to the United Nations Office at Geneva, in which he indicated that he would appreciate receiving any information pertaining to the implementation of the above resolution. No replies had been received at the time of preparation of this report.

3. In addition, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) addressed letters dated 21 July 2005 to the following United Nations entities and specialized agencies represented in the Occupied Palestinian Territory: Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Process (UNSCO), United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), United Nations Relief and Works

* A/60/150.

** This report is delayed in order to cover as much updated information as possible.

05-47861 (E) 150905

Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), World Food Programme (WFP) and World Health Organization (WHO).

4. Information was received from UNFPA, UNRWA and WHO in the course of August 2005. WHO quoted statistics from the Palestinian Ministry of Health indicating that 61 women had given birth at checkpoints between September 2000 and December 2004 and 36 of their babies died as a result. A breakdown of these figures shows that in 2000-2001, 31 pregnant women delivered at checkpoints and 17 of the babies died; in 2002, 16 women gave birth in similar conditions and 11 babies died; in 2003 and 2004, the numbers decreased: 8 and 6 women gave birth at checkpoints and 3 and 5 of the babies died, respectively.

5. According to other statistics provided by UNRWA, not yet complete for 2005, in the Gaza Strip, out of eight pregnant women transported to hospital, one woman gave birth inside the Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PRCS) ambulance while waiting at a checkpoint. Another woman, suffering from problems in her six-month pregnancy, aborted inside a PRCS ambulance, as she was held up for one hour at a checkpoint before being allowed to proceed.

6. According to the same source of information, 15 pregnant women in 2004 and 8 others in 2005 were delayed at checkpoints in the Gaza Strip while being transported to hospital by PRCS ambulance. These delays ranged from 1 to 2 ½ hours and increased during the evacuation of emergency cases from closed areas such as Seafa or Mahata; such patients were first brought by ambulance to the checkpoints, where they were transferred to a second ambulance on the other side. It was reported that prior coordination with the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) was necessary when these transfers occurred after crossing hours.

7. For its part, UNFPA stated that "as a result of increased security procedures at checkpoints and the construction of the Separation Barrier, access of the Palestinian people to hospitals and medical facilities had been significantly impaired. Since 2001, UNFPA had recorded more than 70 cases of women in labour who had been delayed at checkpoints, which resulted in unattended and risky roadside births, causing maternal as well as newborn deaths".

8. The Palestinian Ministry of Health registered an increase of 7.9 per cent in home deliveries in the West Bank (against 0.5 per cent in the Gaza Strip) for 2005, indicating that Palestinian women preferred to give birth at home, without taking the risk of being subjected to potentially hazardous delays at checkpoints. This was also confirmed by UNFPA.

9. Several testimonies of Palestinian pregnant women who were allegedly held at checkpoints by Israeli military were brought to the attention of OHCHR. One such testimony concerned the death of a baby girl at a checkpoint close to Salem village, Nablus Governorate, in August 2003, after her mother gave birth with the assistance of the father, who had to cut the umbilical cord himself with a stone, as both of them were waiting for a second ambulance on the other side of the checkpoint to take them to the hospital.

10. It was also reported that although ambulances were allowed to transport patients through checkpoints during curfews, on the basis of advance coordination with IDF, delays often occurred and ambulances were forced to use secondary roads.

When ambulances were not allowed to go through checkpoints, pregnant women had to be transferred from one ambulance to another on the other side.

11. Several sources indicated that many pregnant women in the Occupied Palestinian Territories feared that they would not be able to reach a hospital in time to give birth. The problem was more acute in rural areas, especially for those women who lived in villages cut off by checkpoints from the cities where the hospitals were located. The drive to a hospital could take several hours, even if the distance was only a few kilometres. Such journeys were impracticable at night, during curfews or when there were military incursions. Additional information received referred to more than 30 per cent of births taking place at home, increasing the risk of complications and the subsequent death of mothers or infants. A growing number of Palestinian women were requesting Caesarean deliveries as a result of psychological apprehension and the fear of not receiving adequate medical care.

12. OHCHR and its Office in Palestine will continue to compile information regarding the issue of Palestinian pregnant women giving birth at Israeli checkpoints, in cooperation with the agencies represented in the United Nations Country Team.